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# Human Rights Situation in Argentina

Mr. and Mrs. Bob Cox, Editor of "Buenos Aires Herald"  
Mr. Charles W. Bray, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State  
Mr. and Mrs. Wayne S. Smith, Political Counselor

PLACE: La Cabaña Restaurant

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Mr. Cox is an Englishman of about 40 years of age who has been in Argentina some 20 years. His newspaper has been the most outspoken defender of human rights and democratic processes in Argentina. His wife, Maude, is an Anglo-Argentine lady of shrewd intelligence.

In response to my request that he outline to me his view of the present situation in Argentina, Mr. Cox made some of the following points:

--The present government did indeed save the country, which had been brought to the verge of collapse by the incompetent and corrupt government of Mrs. Peron. The present military government came to power with widespread, if not indeed unanimous, popular support. Since taking power, however, Mr. Cox believes the government has not lived up to the moderate pronouncements it made on March 24. Cox described the situation as "a terrible black night which may be getting blacker."

--He attributed this situation essentially to the fact that prior to March 24 the Armed Forces felt the previous government was doing little to curb left wing terrorism; hence, the Armed Forces themselves set up a clandestine arm to fight fire with fire, as it were. This counter-terrorist organization has a cellular structure and is therefore very difficult to control. It has continued to operate at forced draft since March 24. The cells operate on their own and directives only filter through from one to the other slowly. Cox's conviction, then, is that most of the excesses are carried out by the Armed Forces themselves and not by the Federal Police, although the Armed Forces try to attribute most of the atrocities to "the corrupt and depraved police"

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force." Cox said that he did not mean to suggest that the police are not corrupt or guilty of excesses, but the majority, he believed, are the work of Armed Forces officers themselves.

--He also noted the extreme bitterness which makes it difficult to control excesses. Many officers in the Armed Forces have seen their friends gunned down by leftist terrorists and many are convinced that the country has been penetrated by Marxist subversives. They see themselves embattled by an enemy from within which they must exorcise at all cost. Cox pointed to the conflict with the Church as an example. Many military officers strongly believe that the majority of the younger priests are subversives who have for years been corrupting Argentine youth. Cox said that this is all nonsense, but you cannot convince the military of that. He attributed, for example, the recent raid on the San Miguel School, and the subsequent imprisonment of four priests, as a result of a conflict between the older and the younger priests in the school. The latter wished to reform the school curriculum. The former strongly resisted and in order to line up the support of the parents, told the latter that the young priests were all Communists. When the parents appealed to the authorities, they reacted by raiding the school and arrested four of the priests. This is typical of what is happening all over the country, Cox said. It is, he concluded, an acute case of McCarthyism in which one may not simply be accused, but actually disappear.

--Despite what is happening, Cox said, he was convinced President Videla is a decent, well-meaning man who probably privately deplores the excesses, but who like most Argentines has a high degree of tolerance and a fatalistic approach to the unpleasant things of life which they simply do not believe they can control. Cox pointed out that Videla does not have a united, monolithic institution behind him. On the contrary, the Armed Forces themselves, and especially the Army, are divided over many issues. Videla, therefore, may not have the strength to bring the security forces under control. Some of his own officers might not support him in this endeavor. The prospects for the future, therefore, are not bright. Cox felt that while the security forces may be somewhat more discreet in the future, the real situation is not likely to improve very much and may even get worse.

--Both Cox and his wife felt strongly that the United States has a positive role to play in all this. They were not quite certain how the U. S. could affect the situation, but they believe that at the very least the Argentine Armed Forces would listen to the U. S. before they would listen to anyone else, and they felt that if nothing else the U. S. served as a democratic example to the rest of the hemisphere. Cox stressed that because of this it was very important that the U. S. have a balanced approach in Argentina; the Fraser Subcommittee, he said, had done much to damage this image. There is, after all, a fine line between a positive role in favor of human rights and something that smacks of paternalistic intervention. The former can be very helpful, the latter can only be counter-productive.

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--Cox concluded by saying that while he deplored the excesses which this government is tolerating, he felt that the Videla government represented Argentina's best hope. There is no other moderate military figure who has a chance of becoming President; hence, if Videla is moved aside, it will be in favor of a general who would be of an even harder line and who would be less acceptable to the democratic forces of the country. Thus, Cox concluded, people of good will could do the most to help the situation by encouraging the moderates around Videla than by simply attacking the government in an unconstructive way.

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